

POVERTY-RELATED EXPERIENCE OF ALMAJIRAI IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Almajiri system is as old as Islam in Northern Nigeria; it is an Islamic practice that encourages Muslims to go in search of Islamic knowledge which according to Prophet Muhammed, is a cherished value that no society is expected to trivialise. Poverty is one of the major social problems in Nigeria. This paper examined poverty-related experience of almajirai. Specifically, it examined: changes in almajiri system in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, causes of poverty of almajirai, and effects of poverty on almajirai in Northern Nigeria. The paper found that almajiri in the pre-colonial era was adequately taken care of by various stakeholders; there was little or no poverty. A combination of parental neglect and polygamy were discovered as the major causes of poverty of almajirai while street-begging and juvenile delinquency were found to be major effects of poverty on almajirai. The paper recommended public enlightenment on the danger of parental neglect and polygamy as a way forward.

Keywords: Almajirai, Islam, Knowledge, Poverty, Scholarship

Introduction

The term '*almajiri*' (plural, almajirai) is a Hausa word for pupil or student. The word is derived from the Arabic term, *al-muhajir*, meaning "the migrant". Historically, the term has its origin in the famous migration of Prophet Muhammed and his compatriots from Makkah to Madinah in the early days of Islam (Khalid, 2006). In its Nigerian usage, the word, "almajiri", means those who left their villages or town, parents, relations, and friends in search of Islamic religious knowledge and scholarship. The Almajiri system is as old as Islam in Northern Nigeria. Among the areas of West Africa into which Islam was early introduced is Kanem-Borno, a part of the territory which forms a part of present day-Nigeria. Complex communication systems on land and water connected several areas which later came to be known as Nigeria (Balogun, 1980). The Almajiri system has been a medium of early childhood Islamic education in Northern Nigeria since the 11th century (Bolujoko, 2008). As far back as 1921, there were 30,411 Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria (Rechmuth, 1989).

This Islamic practice was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology. It has been likened to the Islamic learning centres in many Muslim countries such as the Madrasah in Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt and Indonesia (Danbuzzu, 2013). During the

pre-colonial period in Northern Nigeria, the system was funded from the state treasury and 'zakkat' funds under the control of the emirs. Apart from this, the community supported the almajirai most of whom came from faraway places to enroll in these schools. The students were at liberty to acquire vocational and occupational skills in-between lessons and so were involved in farming, fishing, well construction, masonry, and tailoring (Danbuzzu, 2013). This is well captured by Bala (2014), who asserted that the almajiri schools, as practised during the pre-colonial days, were maintained by the state, communities, parents, *zakkah* (alms/giving), *wagf* (endowment) and supplemented by the teachers and students through farming. Begging was completely unheard of. With this background, almajirai had no reason to beg for sustenance as enough provisions were made through the communal economic system, the parents of almajirai, the extended family system, host community, the Qur'anic schools as well as *Zakat* (alms) from wealthy citizens. The support was in the areas of feeding, clothing, shelter and other forms of welfare to both almajirai and mallams. Almajirai during this period found learning conducive and convenient in the performance of their functions which include transmission of the Islamic culture, entertaining people with the lyrics from recitation of the Holy Qur'an, offering prayers for people, running errands for women in *kule* (purdah) and coordinating prayer sessions in Islamic functions, among others. Many of the almajirai in the pre-colonial era later became farmers in northern Nigeria who produced cotton and groundnut pyramids. They were the leather tanners and leather shoe and Bag makers in the old Sokoto Empire as well as cap weavers and tailors in Zaria city (Danbuzzu, 2013).

Poverty is one of the social problems in Nigeria. Poverty is the deprivation from the basic necessities of life and is the condition of having insufficient resources or income. In most extreme form, poverty is a lack of basic human needs, such as adequate and nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water, and health services (Imhonopi and Urim, 2012). According to the World Bank, cited by Jimoh (2003:42), "poverty is hunger; lack of shelter; being sick and not being able to speak properly; not having a job; fear for the future, losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water; powerlessness; and lack of representation and freedom". The poor in most societies are vulnerable to unpleasant situations and treatments due to the activities of some individuals in the society. From the multi-dimensional definition given by the World Bank, one can infer that poverty is unjustifiable, hazardous, undesirable, difficult, discomfoting and can feature satisfactorily as one of many examples of social problem.

Changes in Almajiri System in Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria

In 1904, the British invaded and colonized the northern Nigeria territories and took control of the treasury, abolished state funding of the almajiri school system, terming it a mere religious institution. *Boko*, a form of western education, was introduced and funded instead. This development rendered Islamic scholars unqualified for employment and participation in politics. Consequently, the situation aroused poverty among the mallams as their jobs were at stake since they could not fit into the western form of education. Invariably, they were denied access into the white-collar jobs. It became glaring, therefore, that with the total lack of support from the

government, and the paucity of help from the Emirs, and the increasing number of almajirai together with the increasing level of poverty in the country, the care of the almajirai became overwhelmingly burdensome for mallams who were left with no choice but to send them out into the streets to beg from the good will of the society. The foregoing is not at variance with the findings from a fieldwork conducted by Sule-Kano (2010), which concluded that the rapid degeneration of socio-cultural and economic support from the communities, coupled with the impact of structural adjustment programme, which brought with it the general withdrawal of government subsidies from the services sector, compounded the problems of the Qur'anic schools. Demographic issues, such as family care, health care, reproductive health, primary education and traditional processes of human development, were grappled with difficulties. Hoechner (2009) expressed the same trend when it was observed that the decline of the rural economy due to oil boom has contributed to perpetuate poverty in the almajiri system. In 1985, Lubeck wrote that by the end of the 1970s, the new wealthy class brought forth by the oil boom had already redefined the migrant quranic students as an embarrassing, dangerous and immoral set of people (Lubeck, 1985).

Understanding Poverty-Related Experiences of Almajirai

As an age-long tradition, these kids are popularly called almajiri-children usually sent to Islamic boarding schools. Formal education remains a far cry for thousands of these children (Nextier, 2020). Poverty is one of the factors bedeviling Almajiri system in Nigeria. The situation of poverty of these almajirai as demonstrated by many scholars shall be reviewed for proper understanding of the subject matter. Investigations conducted in Kano in 2008 for instance, revealed that poverty plays a unique role in the transformation of the hitherto exclusive children affair into an adult 'business' in Northern Nigeria (Shuaibu, 2008). Most children (both the fake and 'genuine' *Almajirai* on the streets) and adults flock into the cities from the villages are in search of alms for survival because of the acute and excruciating poverty in the countryside. Another reason why the *Almajiri* system thrives is the opportunity it affords rural youth to acquire Islamic knowledge, and in the long run, learn some trade or skills which brightens their chances of making a living in the cities (Winters, 1987 in Aluaigba, 2009). All of these are poverty-related issues.

Unfortunately, most children hardly complete the process leading to skill acquisition because they drop out in the process and end up as street beggars. Similar to the poverty factor stated above is the view that the cause of the flourishing Almajiri phenomenon is because some families in the rural areas deliberately send their children to metropolitan areas to cater for themselves due to the inability of such families to bear the burden of providing for their large families (Subbarao; Mattimore and Plangemann, 2001 in Aluaigba, 2009).

Khalid (2000) found that the almajirai are trapped in the vicious circle of poverty, disease and hunger. This is in tandem with the findings from a survey conducted in Sokoto by Sule-Kano (2010) that hunger was found to be the major problem of 23.0% of the almajirai. In Talata Mafara, it was equally found that out of 260 almajirai interviewed, 82.3% were children from peasant families. How does one

expect these young people to resist the temptation of hunger in the midst of this hardship? The harsh condition they experience on daily basis can make them indulge in any unlawful act to enable them meet their needs. Sule-Kano further argued that, instead of the almajirai to concentrate on their studies, they use the major part of the day in search of one thing or the other or engaging in juvenile delinquency. This is not far from what Danbuzzu (2013) observed about the almajirai of the pre-colonial era when almajirai learn some trades in between lessons instead of begging for money and food as it is the case with the almajirai of nowadays.

This explains that the almajirai are not children of the affluent in the society. Is Islamic education as engendered by the almajiri system of education only meant for the poor children? If the almajiri system of education is characterized by traits of poverty, why should Muslims still uphold it? Can't the children learn in their places of origin? Are there no Arabic scholars in their villages or town? If there is a system that cannot sustain itself, shouldn't it be abolished? The most likely answer to these numerous questions is that the almajiri system of education is an age- long tradition of Muslims all over the world, as instituted by Prophet Muhammed and should not be abolished for any reason. This should be one of the reasons why the problem of child beggars persists in North.

Dانبuzzu (2013), equally found that almajirai in Northern Nigeria roam about dirty, tattered, bare foot, pale with flies pecking on their cracked lips and dry faces which is filled with rashes and ringworm. These are clear cases of poverty situation of almajirai in Nigeria. A survey conducted by Daura (1995) shows that the present identity of almajiri system as an avenue for the production of street kids, kid-beggars, hawkers and wanderers was attributed to poverty.

In a related study, Abuh (2015) found that an average almajiri grows up to become menial workers, hewer of wood and drawer of water, which has transformed the almajiri system into a source of child abuse, child labour, child exploitation, neglect and impoverishment as against the age-long system that acted as foundation for generational transmission of Islamic knowledge and culture. The average lifestyle of the almajiri sometimes erroneously referred to as street 'urchins' is the least desired in the society, and because they live a marginalized and precarious existence without social security they rate amongst the most vulnerable groups in the society.

This present situation of the almajirai has made them vulnerable to social vices, including being used as tools to perpetuate terrorism in the North, as Folaranmi (2011) found that most of those used as suicide bombers graduated from the current almajiri system. Research shows that 6 out of 10 almajirai never find their way back home. They are lost through street violence, ritual murder, while others are lost through disease and hunger (Danbuzzu, 2014). There is no gainsaying that the future of these children is jeopardized and the social implication of this development to the country cannot be overemphasized.

Sule-Kano (2010) observed that the circumstances which the Almajirai found themselves are connected to the poor conditions of their parents as their families are

faced with attendant decline in family income which has led to an increasing cost of social and economic burden on parents, as it relates to the bringing up of children. This is corroborated by the experience of an average almajiri, a 14-year old boy who told BBC World (nigeriancuriosity.com2009): “We are really suffering, life is so tough. We don’t have enough water to drink or to wash our clothes. We don’t have enough food, so we have to go and beg”. This speaks volume of the level of poverty of the almajirai in Nigeria. Meeting the basic necessities of life is difficult to an average almajiri and this is capable of pushing them into delinquent activities.

Antoninis (2012) found that almajirai often beg in order to earn a living. While in the past communities have respected this way of life, it has come to be seen more recently as a major social problem. Begging is a manifestation of the level of poverty of the almajirai as they beg for money and food to meet their basic needs, without which their basic necessity of life will be left unsatisfied. This, of course, exhibits poverty in absolute terms.

In a related study, Oyeniyi et al (2009) inferred that street children, almajirai inclusive, are socially excluded in Nigeria. This has a serious implication for the future of the country since it could lead to the proliferation of street gangs who are often involved in various crimes and ready instruments of violence. As Aghedo and Surulolola (2013) observed, the jihadist insurgency in northern Nigeria is better understood as a consequence of youth bulge syndrome, particularly the low-cost availability of foot soldiers from the almajiri demographic cohort. Social exclusion is a risk factor that can push people into some things they probably wouldn’t have done under normal circumstances. The participation of almajirai in the Maitatsine riot in the 1980s shows the level of exclusion as they feel Maitatsine insurgency could pave way for their inclusion in the scheme of things, going by the promise given to them by the leader of the Maitatsine sect. This promise accounts for their commitment in the religious struggle that kicks against orthodox Islamic doctrines and Christians as championed by the leader of the Maitatsine sect. This is a serious threat to social norms and criminal law. For instance, Omeni (2015) found that representations of almajirai within popular literature often associate the system, and attendant youth demographic, with youth delinquency and social violence.

Sule-Kano (2010) found that Almajirai’ poverty situation surfaced out of the poor conditions of the schools and the poor economic levels of most parents that send their children to such schools. The parents could neither provide financial support to their children nor pay fees in whatever form to their teachers. Some parents send their children to these schools not because they want to do so but because they do not have money to send them to better schools as they know that Islamic education is free. Mallams do not have salary for the service they render in the seminary because it is a voluntary service. The children are, therefore, usually left completely in the hands of their teachers who decide how they survive. When the teachers are unable to feed them properly, they resort to begging.

In the study of poverty situation of the Almajirai, Khalid (2000) posited that, lacking in care and proper attention, the children get trapped in the vicious circle of poverty,

disease and hunger. In the ideal situation, the communities should support these children as they leave their families to become servants of Allah. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in Sokoto State as many young boys leave their homes only to end up in street begging. Adamu Aliyu Kikaye, foundation member of the Almajiri Foundation in Kano State warned that, with the North as a hotbed of ethno-religious strife, Almajirai could provide ready foot soldiers. ‘Hungry and angry, these children could easily be mobilized to engage in killings and looting during crises as an avenue to pay back (society) because they see everybody as an enemy’ (Abubakar, 2012).

By the same token, Sadautu Sari, a former Federal legislator from Kano State who formerly headed a parliamentary Committee on Children’s affairs, admitted, “We the elites have to provide for these child beggars for our and our children’s safety. The pathetic life they live breeds heartless criminals” (Abubakar, 2012). Looking at poverty as one of the delinquency-breeding factors in almajirai lifestyle and living conditions, one is tempted to be nostalgic of the almajirai of the pre-colonial era. The communal economic structure which provided for all and sundry including Almajirai did not give room for poverty because everyone was a stakeholder in the scheme of things which was displaced with the incorporation of the Northern Nigeria into the capitalist economic system with its individualistic ethos.

The above scenario led to the harsh situation that brought about begging which, according to Sule-Kano (2010), is the most distracting aspect of the Almajiri system of education as it could, among other things, make them associate with delinquent groups and the possibility of internalizing those delinquent traits. Poverty could constitute a major problem. When meeting the barest essentials of life is impaired by poverty and want, there is that tendency for some individuals to take to illegitimate means to fulfill basic needs. Marshall (1998) observed that, poverty, in absolute terms, refers to a state in which the individual lacks the resource necessary for subsistence. According to Ake (1981), economic need is man’s most fundamental need. Unless man is able to meet this need, he cannot exist in the first place. To Ekpe and Mamah (1997:93), “poverty is real. It is a social problem of the first order and it requires urgent attention. Poverty is a state of want, need or deprivation”. The use of illegal means to address poverty situation is espoused by some theories of criminal and delinquent behaviour, such as frustration aggression theory by J. Dollard (1939 cited by Igbo 1999), differential opportunity theory, and strain theory.

Igbo (1999) observed that poverty is a multi-dimensional concept, which has to do with employment, income and standard of living, social and infrastructural facilities. In the same vein Townsend (1970 in Igbo, 1999) sees poverty as a general form of relative deprivation, which is the outcome of the mal-administration of resources in societies. People who live from hand to mouth by searching for food on daily basis experience absolute deprivation. The implication of this for juvenile delinquency is obvious. The Almajirai are people from low-income families and, to worsen the problem, if they stay at home without going out in search of daily bread, they will end up not eating or eat a little throughout the day. Through their struggle, they are able to feed, take care of their toilet and laundry needs as well as buy some few articles of clothing. Many of them have no access to good education, health and other

infrastructural facilities. These features account for their vulnerability in comparison with orphans and children from broken homes.

The Almajirai are in a state of need and want or deprivation. Therefore, most of the time, they have to resort to deviant behaviour to get those things without which they may not survive. They are compelled by conditions to do something they probably would not have done under normal circumstances. Hence, poverty seems to lead people into deviant behaviour.

Some of the almajirai are forced into the act of begging and doing menial jobs. Others who are not lucky are initiated into violent crimes and vices that will end up transforming them negatively in life (Sadjere, 2010). One of the Almajirai, Abdullahi, quoted in *Tell* magazine (2009), has this to say. "Though the condition under which they live is almost inhuman because basic things like food and clothing are lacking, they have no option because their parents are poor". Still on the poverty situation of parents of Almajirai, one of the parents of the almajirai, Bello Abdulsalam, stated that he embraced the almajiri education system because he lacks the means to cater for his children, adding that no one will like to lose contact with his kids for years (*Tell*, 2009).

As observed earlier, an average almajiri looks pale, apparently due to malnutrition, with blisters on his lips. The dryness of his face and rashes on his skin suggest that harmattan has taken its toll on him (Nairaland Forum, 2014). This observation corresponds with the study conducted on the socioeconomic, demographic and health problems of almajirai in Sokoto State, which found skin diseases as one of the major health problems bedeviling almajirai in the study area (Shuaibu and Jimoh, 2011). This study of almajirai socioeconomic, demographic and health problems in Sokoto State is equally in agreement with studies of street children conducted in two cities of Ukraine, Kyiv and Odessa (UNICEF, 2006), Kathmandu (Christophe, 2007), Kenya (Ayaya and Esama, 2001) and Bangalore (Benegal et al., 1998)(See Shuaibu and Jimoh, 2011). The parents could neither provide financial support to their children nor pay fees in whatever form to their teachers. The children are, therefore, usually left completely under the care of their teachers and their devices for survival. Begging is one of such devices.

Causes of Poverty-Related Experience of Almajirai

Beside insensitivity of governments to its citizens which affects many segments of the society, as insinuated before now, there are other major causes of poverty of almajirai. They include but not limited to the following:

Parental neglect

Parental neglect is one of the family-related social problems bedeviling almajirai in Nigeria. For instance, Abuh (2015) found that almajirai are effectively abandoned by their parents and exploited by their Mallams and members of the public; as they end up facing a future lifestyle woven by poverty and hardship. This is because the Islamic education they receive only equips them with few skills that do not fit into the harsh and capitalist-oriented modern economy that the nation operates and, thus,

cannot offer them profitable employment. The above findings corroborate Asuelimu (2015), who observed that almajiri system is a dysfunctional educational system, which produced children the parents do not care for but dump them with mallams or Quranic teachers, who misuse impressionable kids as beggars and means of livelihood.

In a field survey conducted in Sokoto State by Sule-Kano (2010), it was found that most parents would prefer not to contribute anything to the upkeep of their almajiri children. In some schools less than 10% of parents made any contribution at all. This shows that almajirai are neglected by their parents which is capable of pushing them into social vices as they rely on different devices to keep body and souls in harmony. Those in the village constitute the major source of labour on farms while those in the city are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation of different magnitude (see Tilde, 2013; Khalid, 2000).

Polygamy

Closely related to the deteriorating role of the families of Almajirai is the issue of polygamy. This is a situation where people, just for religious permissiveness, marry as many as 3-4 wives and produce as many children as possible only to be taken to mallams so as to relieve themselves of the responsibilities of training them. As a corollary, children from such families who suffer deprivation seek alternative means of survival which may only be found in the easily accessible 'trade' of street begging. Thus, child abuse and neglect have continued unabated in Northern Nigeria (Aluaigba, 2009). This shows a close relationship between polygamy and the plight of almajirai.

Effects of Poverty on Almajirai

The effect of poverty on almajirai is the creation of more social problems. The problems are as follows:

Street-Begging

One of the major almajirai-related social problems is street-begging. Abuh (2015) found that almajirai whose age range is between three (3) and twenty (20) years, with exception of a few older ones, usually spend all their days on the streets, in market places and shopping malls, pleading for alms to earn a living for themselves. Begging is the only thing that takes these almajirai out of the control of their teachers where they are at liberty to do whatever they want. If it is noble for parents to send children to Almajiri schools, it is equally noble to take care of their needs. Sule-Kano's study (2010) indicated that religious conviction of Muslim families of Almajiri was one of the basic causes of the Almajirai problems, particularly, begging, which gives almajirai the opportunity to mix up with delinquent children that could lead them into imbibing negative habits. This is a glaring case of begging leading to juvenile delinquency.

Aluaigba (2009) found that begging exposes almajirai to all sorts of vile and deviant behaviour and immoral acts because they interact freely with people of low virtue like prostitutes, drug addicts and gamblers. Almajirai are capable of imbibing some

negative values as a result of the criminogenic influences from the social networks and contact from the company of such people of questionable character.

In a survey conducted in Sokoto metropolis between November 1995 and June 1997, it was found that, between lessons, 77.6% of the total almajirai under study would go round the city with their bowls, street-by-street, and compound-by-compound, begging for food and money to keep body and soul in harmony. The need to survive through begging can introduce them into so many things (Khalid, 2001).

Juvenile Delinquency

Another serious effect of poverty of almajirai is juvenile delinquency. Empirical studies have shown that these almajirai, like other vulnerable children in Kano State, are vulnerable to victimization and child trafficking, ritual killings, drug abuse, sexual/labour abuse, economic exploitation and recruitment as agents of destruction in time of civil disturbance. For instance, Maikano (2000) found that vulnerable children in Kano metropolis make up the highest percent of juvenile delinquents and, when they mature, they graduate into criminals, engaging in looting, drug addiction, theft, political violence, and often involved in murder and armed robbery, among many other social vices. Almajirai lifestyle and living condition as characterized by parental neglect, poverty, and street-begging, among others, is a source of worry as it could predispose them to social vices. Almajirai alleged social networks and contacts with people of questionable characters like Maitatsine, Yandaba, Boko Haram, drug addicts, gambler, traffickers, politicians, and cultists could equally breed outlawed behaviour among almajirai (Shehu, 2012; Yau, 2000).

The Maitatsine disturbance in Kano alone resulted in the death of 4,177 people between December 18 and 29, 1980. The main adherents of Maitatsine were almajirai (Armed Conflict Events Data, 2013).

In the same direction, from 1980-1985, Northern Nigeria witnessed four main religious crises and, according to Winters (1987), the participants in these riots were the Almajirai. In the 2004 religious crisis in Kano city, the violence unleashed on innocent residents was successful because the participants comprised mainly Almajirai (Human Rights Watch, 2005)

Conclusion

The paper has succeeded in examining the poverty-related experience of almajirai. It was found that parental neglect and polygamy are major causes of poverty-related experience of almajirai while street-begging and juvenile delinquency were found to be major effects of poverty-related experience of almajirai. To solve the problem of poverty of almajirai, it is recommended that public enlightenment on the danger of parental neglect and polygamy should be prioritised. If something is not done urgently, it could lead to other social problems: child abuse, disease and human trafficking, to mention but a few of such negativities.

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